DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 165 279 EA 011 195

AUTHOR Bornstein, Leonard
TITLE The Politics of Enrollment Decline.
PUB DATE 2 Dec 78
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the New Jersey School Board Association (Hightstown, New Jersey, December 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Role; Board of Education Role; Budgets; *Declining Enrollment; Educational Administration; Elementary Secondary Education; Financial Problems; *Politics; School Closing; State Aid
IDENTIFIERS New Jersey

ABSTRACT

New Jersey's removal of $22 million from its 1979-80 state school aid payments requires that school administrators immediately establish priorities and explore options for dealing with enrollment decline. From 1969 to 1978 New Jersey K-6 enrollment has dropped 19.4 percent. The time for selecting reasonable approaches to declining enrollment is running out. Board members and administrators can either retain all schools, facilities, and programs in spite of great costs or cut programs, staff, and schools. Since the former alternative is unrealistic, the best place to start may be to urge citizens, teachers, students, and administrators to identify criteria to use for closing programs and schools. It is difficult to deal with enrollment decline because sometimes the best solutions are not the most politically expedient. Board members must make decisions destined to make them unpopular. Districts need to develop procedures for dealing with enrollment decline in as technical a fashion as possible. Today's need is for administrators able to plan for and manage declining enrollment problems, particularly declining budgets, new curriculum needs, job attrition, and school closure. Although there are no easy answers to the problem of declining enrollment, this period is an opportune time for leaders with commitment and a sense of history. (Author/JM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED165279

DR. LEONARD BORNSTEIN

THE POLITICS OF ENROLLMENT DECLINE
NJSBA CONFERENCE 12/2/78
HIGHTSTOWN, NEW JERSEY

DR. LEONARD BORNSTEIN

Problems related to enrollment decline in the State of New Jersey may come to be considered in two distinct phases -- pre-November 27th, 1978 and post-November 27th, 1978. On that date Governor Byrne signed into law legislation that removed $22 million from 1979-80's $1.5 billion state school aid payments. Prior to the signing, concerns generally focused on the following issues:

1. Rate of enrollment decline,
2. Options available to school systems experiencing decline,
3. Methods for selecting appropriate schools to close,
4. Possible alternate uses for terminated school facilities.

Sufficient evidence exists now to verify the enrollment drop. Samuel Baum, international demographic expert for the U.S. Census Bureau released a report this past month indicating that the world population growth rate has reversed itself and had begun declining according to 1976 calculations. The report showed that in almost half the world's most crowded countries, the population growth rate declined in the last ten years. U.S. public elementary enrollment (K-8) in 1969 was 32.6 million students. By 1974 the number was reduced by 1.9 million children and projections for 1983 are 1.6 million under that figure - a fourteen-year drop of 10.7%. State of New Jersey statistics are even more dramatic as the 798,633 (K-6) students of 1969-70 are approximately 644,000 at this moment, a 19.4% ten-year reduction.

EA 011 195

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

L. Bornstein

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

This evidence, along with available data on new borns to five-year olds, allows us to see to the 1983-84 school year at least. Even an upturn in births at that point would not generate increased enrollments sufficient to refill the already empty chairs through the end of the century.

There are those anticipating a "turning point" which may not occur in time to reward their optimism. Indeed for them that may be precisely the strategy. The time for selecting reasonable approaches is running out!

Board members and chief school administrators appear to be faced with two basic courses of action. One is to retain all school facilities, programs and staffs; allow class and school sizes to decrease to minimum levels; use excess space for art, music and supplemental activity areas and give the citizens and their children the full benefits of an ideal educational setup, the type dreamt about during the growth years. Certainly it will cost money, but quality schools make quality neighborhoods and therefore quality property values -- not to speak of the potential for educational gains.

The other choice points to the economic savings brought about by facility consolidation, staff reduction, program terminations and elimination of duplicated services across the school system.

Which will it be? Dreams and fantasies notwithstanding, we can't have both. Realistically speaking, there probably isn't a choice anyway. I am not one who desires school closings which move programs and services further from the neighborhoods they affect, but the world of reality in which I live dictates that consolidation be seriously considered if we are to retain essential aspects of our educational service. The time for reasonable approaches is running out!

The identification of local criteria as a measure against which all schools and programs might be compared and/or evaluated may be a reasonable place for school board to start. Lay citizens, teachers, students, administrators might take part in the processes leading to the development of a decision - making procedure. We might then term the resulting decisions .... recommendations .. resolutions as rational and logical. Very often, however, rational and logical decisions can be altered by unanticipated influences existing beyond the considerations of those charged with the responsibility for making recommendations. A logical choice-school in a community may not be the one ultimately closed because of these influences. The consideration of a school closing, fraught as it is with anxiety and emotional stress, can give rise to activities in the community, political in nature, which can lead to influence and pressure being exerted on decision-making bodies -- in this instance, boards of education. These pressures can produce unanticipated outcomes. Since school districts are units of government and the voters have ultimate responsibility, school board members and school superintendents are engaged in political activity whether it is to their liking or not. These people need to be "good politicians." Thomas Eliot in his book "Toward an Understanding of Public Politics" asserted that it is

"high time" to stop being frightened of the term. Politics includes the making of governmental decisions, and the effort or struggle to gain or keep the power to make those decisions. Board members and superintendents will need these skills in order to deal with the pressures that can be expected with school closing decisions.

Pertinent research in communities where schools have been closed discloses the following:

1. neighborhoods with the least political clout tend to lose their schools. That is to say, areas which are characterized by low-voter turnout in board elections; poor attendance at board meetings or at committee sessions results in a loss of contact and influence with educational decision-making centers,
2. elected board members connected with contested school-closings tend not to be reelected.
3. where ongoing community information programs regarding enrollment, budget and staff considerations are available, the impact of ultimate decisions tends to be softened - particularly if a recommended course of action is discussed over a three year period. Not many of these programs exist.

The indication here, then, is that negative aspects of political activity may be impinging on solutions to problems that might be better resolved in a manner that is efficient, rational and equitable to all concerned.

The behavior of school-board members, too, may play a part. As with all humans, board people need to be acknowledged, accepted, 'stroked' for their efforts. There's an "okay" feeling that comes with being liked, admired, respected - particularly by neighbors. Unfortunately, all board of education actions don't make community residents smile. Some policies bring frowns; some bring anger - some even result in fury. Robert Braun in the November 26th issue of the Star Ledger said of teacher strikes, "Teachers often strike, not because they believe leaving the children is wise, but because they fear isolation from their colleagues. No one wants to be a 'scab.' No one enjoys ostracism -- or as has happened frequently enough, flat tires and midnight telephones." An analogy can be drawn with board members voting on issues which evoke emotional reactions among segments of the community. Sometimes events can be unpleasant - even ugly. It's at those moments that even the heartiest and most resilient politician among us seeks to avoid the pain connected with conflict and confrontation. Suddenly decisions that were once rather straightforward administrative decisions become social and political ones. It is precisely this condition that my studies attempted to identify - and did in 25% of the cases.

Districts need to develop overall procedures for dealing with enrollment decline in as technical a fashion as possible. Accurate data needs to be constantly accumulated; goals established; existing educational policies re-defined and new educational policies developed; and criteria for school closings determined. As more experience is gained in the State, sharing of information among districts is essential. Efficiency-based procedures currently exist in the literature as a possible means by which to broaden decision-making bases. In their study in Philadelphia, Herron and Fascione stated that "...we have no alternative but to strengthen our decision-making base and substitute research methodology and management planning for the political process that have traditionally shaped our educational programming."

Time for selecting reasonable approaches is running out. The governor's legislated budget cut of $22 million last month is significant because it has the effect of mandating that we establish priorities and explore options immediately. Budget presentations for 1979-80 are due within the next three months. Some major items are going to have to go and soon. What undesired choices are now unavoidable?

In August 1978 the following selected comments appeared in the San Francisco Examiner in an article entitled, "What Proposition 13 Has Done to San Francisco Schools."

> The 15% cut required of the district in the upcoming school year has required extensive layoffs of teachers, supervisors and maintenance personnel. A projected additional $17 million cut for the following school year, commencing in the Fall of 1979, will cause even further cutback in programs and facilities.
>
> More than 450 teachers have been laid off. Many of these teachers are specialists in the fields of reading, teaching of the physically and mentally handicapped, music and bilingual education ...
>
> The layoff of approximately 150 maintenance personnel will mean that schools are likely to be less physically attractive than in the past..
>
> The disappearance of nine public schools from various parts of the city tends to produce the feeling in those areas that they no longer have any involvement or stake in the public school system ...
>
> While it is true that the return to the classroom of 70 administrators will save the district a significant amount, it will also have an adverse effect on certain programs which no longer will have central supervision..
>
> Similarly the reduction in the number and capacity of child-care centers, the elimination of 23 gymnasiums and 42 playgrounds as afterschool recreation sites, the charging of community groups for the more than 3,000 meetings a year that will traditionally be held in public school buildings will save the district money.
>
> But less child care forces back on welfare more single parents who were formerly able to hold jobs because this service was available. Fewer afterschool recreation sites will mean for several areas in the city, no place for school-age youngsters to use their energy in constructive ways.

A glimpse into our future? One wonders. Administrators and other school leaders have had to plan for the changes of growth for the greater part of their careers. Today's need is for administrative and school leaders with the ability to plan for and manage the changes of decline, particularly as they affect declining resource budgeting, redesigned curriculum for smaller student enrollments, human behavior as job attrition affects staff, and proposed school closings as they affect community residents. Decline offers us challenges unknown in the educational experience. Growth held out the promise of career advancement; decline portends job consolidation. Growth encouraged and provided for multiple priorities; decline necessitates focus on only a few.

It is appropriate to note the admonition of Dr. William Keough in his Phi Delta Kappa booklet on enrollment. "Deeply ingrained in our American way of life is the shibboleth that problems have solutions. Regardless of the degree of analytical skills brought to bear or the level of introspection applied, the reality is that not all problems have solutions. To believe and to state that there are easy solutions that can be implemented to turn around the problems connected with decline is self-deceptive prevarication. There are however, courses of action that can be implemented to prepare for and modify the impact of these events."

Board members and chief school administrators will have to explore multiple courses of action and forward recommendations that stress original, even daring, short and long-range plans. Vague, ambivalent, hedged positions will only create greater handicaps for school systems to overcome when "due time" arrives.

The time for selecting reasonable approaches is running out. These are extraordinary times. They require extraordinary leadership from individuals willing to make complex decisions which, regardless of position, are guaranteed to make someone out there unhappy and make you unpopular. They are marvelous, opportune times, however, for those leaders with unbridled commitment and a sense of history.